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The Englishness of English Punk: Sex Pistols, Subcultures and Nostalgia

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The Englishness of English Punk: Sex Pistols, Subcultures and Nostalgia

Abstract

This article considers the Englishness of English Punk, or, more specifically, the Englishness of the Sex Pistols and the cultural productions associated with them. It will consider whether the challenge that they posed to conventional, Establishment, consensus notions of Englishness has merely been recuperated as an entertaining diversion within a broader hegemonic nationalist history, or whether this challenge has had a more fundamental impact. It will argue that the Pistols facilitated a reframing and a re-imagining of English culture, and left a legacy, which has been drawn upon by a number of subsequent art and music subcultures.

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This article seeks to examine the Englishness of English Punk, or, more specifically, the Englishness of the Sex Pistols and the individuals and cultural productions associated with them.

It will consider whether the challenge that they posed to conventional, Establishment, consensus notions of Englishness has merely been recuperated as an entertaining diversion within a broader hegemonic nationalist history, or whether this challenge has had a more fundamental impact. It will contemplate the possibility that the Pistols, to some extent, facilitated a reframing and a re-imagining of English culture, and further suggest that the current Grime musical culture is evidence for punk's legacy and enduring influence.

What is without question is that the Sex Pistols, and the cultural phenomena that they created, generated, and inspired, were decidedly English. Although Johnny Rotten was of Irish parentage, and Malcolm McLaren was half Jewish,ⁱ and despite the fact that the Pistols called for Anarchy in the *UK* and attacked the *British* monarchy, as a consequence no doubt of the band being born and bred Londoners the culture which they both drew on and reflected was *English*. They offered relatively few representations of either the specific nationalist cultures and issues of the other dominions of the Union, or those of the regions beyond London.ⁱⁱ

Punk, as a number of theorists, most conspicuously Dick Hebdige, have noted, was a subculture constructed through a process of collage, of *bricolage*. Bits and pieces of both officially sanctioned and popular English culture, of politics

and history were brought together in a chaotic, uneasy admixture to form a new culture; a culture that arguably spotlighted the very institutions that it nominally sought to destroy. Whatever the - still disputed - motivations, the Sex Pistols' output and career can only be fully understood within the context of English history.

This is clearly demonstrated by two films - one contemporary, one a historical account - which sought to offer a critical commentary on, and context for punk.

Derek Jarman's *Jubilee* was made in 1977 which, if not the high point of punk, arguably represented a peak in public awareness of the movement. The film draws on the conventional repertoire of English Heritage; it opens in the court of Elizabeth I and it is significant that the name of the messenger who guides the old Queen into the future world of her namesake is Aerial, a Shakespearean reference. This future - "the present" - is an apocalyptic wasteland, the aftermath of a civil war. A wasteland in which punks and police fight running battles in the streets of London, in which although patriarchal society has apparently been overthrown the real power lies with a monopolistic media baron who lives in bucolic splendour on a Dorset country estate. In this 'contemporary' setting, the references to English Heritage are no less apparent than in the opening sequences,

albeit distorted and detoured. Further Shakespearean references abound, and punk celebrity Jordan adopts the guise of a number of female English icons - Elizabeth II, Britannia - which are twisted and wrested from their conventional representations to lay bare the ruthless and oppressive politics they occlude. That history is a fictional narrative written by the victors is made plain, a conclusion that John Lydon also drew from the various - and rarely accurate - histories of himself.ⁱⁱⁱ The social chaos portrayed in *Jubilee* may have been somewhat exaggerated for dramatic effect, but the settings are all too real. The film gives a stark account of just how derelict and desolate large areas of London were in the late 1970s; a grey world of bombsites, council blocks, graffiti and grime.

Such a view is also not absent from Julien Temple's 1999 retrospective account of the Pistols' story, *The Filth and the Fury*. News footage of blasted urban landscapes, race riots, industrial unrest and piles of uncollected rubbish are juxtaposed with apparently more innocuous aspects of English culture, such as Michael Fish presenting the weather, Big Ben and illuminated manuscripts. This film, even more so than *Jubilee*, clearly locates punk within the context of English cultural history. Explicitly illustrated are Lydon's use of Shakespeare's (or, more specifically Olivier's) Richard III to create his stage persona, and both his and McLaren's

employment of Dickensian imagery - Oliver Twist in particular - in the construction of the band's image. McLaren describes the Pistols as his "little Artful Dodgers," thus casting himself in the role of one of the two most notorious Jewish entrepreneurs in English literature. The Pistols themselves are presented less as menaces to society than the inheritors of the English Music Hall tradition; the heirs to the crowns of Arthur Askey and Max Wall, operating outside of the "legitimate theatre" and characterised by clownish outfits, silly walks, smutty jokes and cocking a snook at the Establishment. The Pistols, it is stressed, were working in the tradition of English, working class musical theatre, not Rock and Roll, which was - like other undesirable rogue elements such as heroin, Nancy Spungen and a uniform of black leather jackets - an American import.^{iv}

Malcolm McLaren makes this very explicit in a radio programme in which he comments on Andy Warhol's multiple portrait of the Queen from 1985. Of Warhol's painting he says:

You can't take it seriously; there is no depth of character. It's flat; it's just an icon. It's vacuous, it's empty, it's just like a Coca-Cola bottle. If that's what we've got to consider the Queen as, then in some respects I'd be happy to say that perhaps we won't have any more queens as we tried to impose, with a thought

about the Queen back in the days when I managed the Sex Pistols. We took the Queen's portrait, by Cecil Beaton, we printed it just like a silk screen image no different from Andy Warhol here, we filled in some colors, but we put a safety pin through her nose, and we wrote on the side "God Save the Queen, she ain't no human being." We basically didn't molly-coddle her, we didn't put her up on a pedestal, we were basically saying "this icon is a joke." Because right there in the '70s, we were already demonstrating our resistance against this vacuous, gilded, Hollywood, American way of dominating culture with stories that were genuinely untrue. We were now trying to authenticate our beliefs, move away from American culture, resist and fight it and come up with a culture of our own. That was punk rock, and we wrote the song and equally painted a portrait, *our* version of the Queen, and got it on the front page of the *Daily Mirror*, on Queen's Silver Jubilee day! (McLaren *Portrait: Andy Warhol's Queen Elizabeth II*, broadcast on BBC Radio4, 14 August 2006)

The Pistols, then, might be regarded as unlikely guardians of English Heritage, albeit expressing a history which stressed the popular cultural and the radical dissenting pamphleteering elements of that heritage rather than the more conventional (pro)monarchical and aristocratic aspects. In this, the

Pistols were absolutely of their time, given that the 1970s marked the point in English history when (as a consequence of furious lobbying and energetic marketing^v) the "Heritage Industry" - from visits to "Stately Homes" to the immense popularity of Laura Ashley - became a firmly established element of national life.

Christopher Booker has claimed that "Never before in history had there been an age so distrustful of the present, so fearful of the future, so enamoured of the past. Therein lay the significance of the Seventies." (Weight 544) Representatively, Roy Strong reflected in 1978 that:

It is in times of danger, either from without or from within, that we become deeply conscious of our heritage ... within this word there mingle varied and passionate streams of ancient pride and patriotism, of a heroism in times past, of a nostalgia too for what we think of as a happier world which we have lost. [...] Our [...] heritage is therefore a deeply stabilising and unifying element within our society. (Weight 544)

While the Pistols clearly had no intention of being either a stabilising or a unifying element within society - quite the opposite in fact - the notion that there might be "No Future" was in fact an extremely widespread fear. If there is nothing to look forward to then the only option is to

look backwards. If there can be no future then we are all, as a nation, obliged to live in the past. As Savage suggests, in the early '70s:

The country carried all the psychic baggage of a Pyrrhic victory. Despite the post-war burst of Socialism, the war had seemed to vindicate the status quo. The incidence of films celebrating England's endurance and victory was in a direct ratio to the refusal of its people to see the need for change. England was smug and static, full of imperial pretensions... (Savage, England's 108)

Nevertheless, given punk's active construction of new social and aesthetic modes of being, it paradoxically suggested that there perhaps could and would be an (alternative) future, a utopian vision that did not depend entirely on wallowing in nostalgia.

It is perhaps useful at this juncture to introduce the distinction, articulated by Laurence Lerner, between "Eden" and "Utopia"; two myths that arose and endure within human cultures to explain and compensate for the shortcomings of life lived in the present. Although the two concepts are neither necessarily antithetical nor incompatible (indeed, they bookend a linear human history in both Marxist and Christian accounts) they tend, argues Lerner, to give rise to

differing conceptions of the trajectory of history and to different sensibilities. "The one sees it as going upward, the other downward, to or from the paradise that transcends history." (Lerner 76) "The one structures our experience with sadness, the other with fierce hope. One speaks an elegy, the other a call to action." (Lerner 65) The narrative of Eden relates a fall from grace, whilst that of Utopia posits the possibility of a bright future; the former tends to lead to resignation, nostalgia and quietism, whilst the latter calls for zeal and can be translated into an active political programme. If we transpose this model onto English society in the 1970s, we can argue that the Edenic position reflects that of the Establishment and its adherents (i.e. "straight" or "mainstream" society) whereas the Utopian position relates closely to that of punk. Such a claim is given credence by Lerner's assertion that

When such zeal fails, we see that it has to, and we regard it with fear and pride. We see that it was exhilarating and dangerous, like a hero so obsessed that he cannot compromise or accept the limitations of mere living. It is out of such passions that tragedy is made.

(79)

This narrative has clear parallels with punk's short, explosive, yet ultimately doomed existence.^{vi}

Patrick Wright argues that:

National Heritage involves the extraction of history - of the idea of historical significance and potential - from a denigrated everyday life and its restaging or display in certain sanctioned sites, events, images, and conceptions. In this process history is redefined as the historical, and it becomes the object of a similarly transformed and generalised public attention. (69)

This might be said to offer a fairly accurate account of the Pistols' career, but what happens when they - unavoidably - became the object of a "generalised public attention," a part of history? Must they suffer the fate of oppositional places and ideas described by Jane Jacobs, becoming "sanitised and depoliticised in their transit into officially sanctioned heritage."? (23)

Certainly, if we consider a publication such as *Satellite Sex Pistols*, it appears to be symptomatic of the theorists' worst nightmares of the recuperation of all dissent within the dominant hegemony. The book, while a useful visual resource, reduces the Pistols' legacy to a collectors' guide of punk memorabilia and provides a "tourists' guide" to the streets of London. This begins: "You are about to go back in time and revisit key locations in the Sex Pistols story. So grab your A to Z, switch on your Walkman and let's go..." (Burgess 8) In this publication there is a distinct lack of the awkward,

critical questioning, the self-reflexive interrogation that was a key characteristic of punk; no question of whether being either a tourist or an "anorak" might be antithetical to the project's intentions. As much is, however, acknowledged by the former editor of *The Filth and The Fury* fanzine; while he admits that he is as guilty as the next fan, he fears for the obsessives who "spend huge amounts of their time and money on them, they're not interested in any other bands, or any other kind of music, they're stuck in a rut... Exactly the opposite of what the Pistols were supposed to be about." (Murphy 25)

This could be seen as the apotheosis of a reactionary project which has reduced the threat of punk through the processes of mass commercialisation, diffusion and domestication - through, for example, numerous tabloid exposés and magazine articles featuring "Punks and their Mothers", punk babies and punk weddings. Such articles, as Hebdige suggests, "served to minimise the Otherness so stridently proclaimed in punk style, and defined the subculture in precisely those terms which it sought most vehemently to resist and deny." (98)

Arguably the band themselves have been complicit in the "Pistols Heritage Industry", staging their own "Silver Jubilee" celebrations in the form of a(nother) reunion concert in 2002 and licensing numerous souvenir commodities from pencil cases to fridge magnets; and this all before Lydon

accepted a place within mainstream celebrity culture and ventured into the "jungle."^{vii} For many of those with a vested interest in the movement, punk was already "history" by 1979. The approach taken by Fred and Judy Vermorel and Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons in their books *Sex Pistols: The Inside Story* and *The Boy Looked At Johnny*, dating from '77 and '78 respectively, and McLaren's 1979 film *The Great Rock'n'Roll Swindle* is testament to this. Dick Hebdige's seminal work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, first published in 1979, also refers to punk only in the past tense. Punk was history, finished; the full story could now be told.

However, in the mid 1970s, although it was always considered probable that punk would have a short (if intense) lifespan, with a "moral panic" in full swing the normalising, let alone memorialising, of this most oppositional of subcultures did not appear to be a likely fate.^{viii} Not least because, unlike the mainstream Heritage Industry, Punk was trafficking in history, not merely wallowing in nostalgia; it was highlighting what Wright has described as "the cheap little ruse in which history subsequently turned 'our' short-lived victory [in the War] into long-term defeat." (25)

Nostalgia and history explosively met head on during the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977. The official Jubilee celebrations met with unexpected success, with some 90% of the

population giving themselves over to what Tom Nairn called "the Glamour of Backwardness." (Savage, England's 352) This was perhaps unsurprising given the media saturation, the promise of additional holidays and something to look forward to and celebrate in circumstances that offered few opportunities for either. Beyond the formal celebrations, consisting of a service at St Paul's Cathedral and a royal walkabout, approximately 6,000 street parties were held in London alone. Reports of the celebrations throughout the Union stressed the breaching of class, racial and sectarian barriers, and there was much talk of the rekindling of "community spirit" reminiscent of the discourse of the Second World War. However, as Richard Weight suggests: "The emphasis on reconciliation [...] was an explicit acknowledgement that national unity had broken down." (546) This was a fact acknowledged even more explicitly by the 10% (of whom the Pistols were the most notorious and visible members,) for whom the Jubilee, as Savage suggests,

seemed an elaborate covering of the social cracks - with fading Coronation wallpaper. [...] 'God Save the Queen' was the only serious anti-Jubilee protest, the only rallying call for those who didn't agree with the Jubilee because [...] they resented being steamrollered by such sickening hype, by a view of England which had not the remotest bearing on their everyday experience. (Savage, England's 352-353)

Yet for all its offensive republicanism and the sacrilegious treatment of national icons in Jamie Reid's accompanying artwork, "God Save the Queen" was not, I would argue, *per se*, anti-nationalist, or anti-patriotic. Rather, it was an attack on a particular version of English nationalism, the monarchical, jingoistic, xenophobic sense of superiority, which - despite periods of nominally Socialist government - had been an important aspect of the post-war consensus. In doing so, the Pistols were arguably working in another "tradition" of dissenting, yet quintessentially English culture, this time from earlier in the twentieth century. Both the "Angry Young Men" of the 1950s and the "satire boom" of the 1960s set out to attack the "complacency" of consensus Britain and "'the unthinking attitudes of respect' which still predominated" (Carpenter 119).^{ix}

"God Save the Queen" likewise, for all of its apparent negativity, pointed a way towards a new, more positive, reframing of Englishness. An England, perhaps, of citizens rather than subjects. As Lydon protested in *The Filth and the Fury*: "You don't write "God Save the Queen" because you hate the English race, you write a song like that because you love them and you're fed up with them being mistreated." And, "We declared war on England without meaning to."

The metaphor of war was an apt one because, as Mark Sinker argues:

'No Future' was never a threat; it was a *promise*. It was - it is - a moral fact, a fundamental conundrum: how to behave in the last days, when authority is ended. Life during wartime; how to live happily and decently when this is as good as things may ever get (133).

It was also apt because the Second World War loomed extremely large in nominally post-war British society. As Billy Bragg has noted: "The mythology of 1940, fed by heroic war films and the soft stereotypes of 'Allo, 'Allo and *Dad's Army*, is rooted deeply within our national consciousness." (Savage, *England's* x) This dominance of history (and a historical victory) was, for many punks, a problem, not least because it was used as a stick with which to beat the younger generations. Hence the deployment of the swastika as the ultimate offensive symbolic weapon;^x however, as Patrick Wright suggests:

Abject and manipulative as it undoubtedly is, the public glorification of war can express the real counterpoint which the experience of war has provided to the routinised, constrained and empty experience of much modern everyday life. In war - and surely not just for men - personal actions can count in a different way, routine can have a greater sense of meaning and

necessity, and there can be some experience not just of extremity (avant-garde pleasure), but also of purpose. In this undoubtedly limited respect war can indeed be recollected as both more meaningful than normal everyday life and also as a purification (23).

Given that a major complaint of the punk generation was a persistent boredom, was it possible that they were, to some extent, "envious" of the extreme experiences of the older generations, experiences that they both flaunted and seemed intent on withholding from the young? Was punk, perhaps, a form of symbolic war, to facilitate avant-garde pleasures and a sense of purpose? Joe Queenan suggests that such an idea is embodied by The Clash song "London Calling".

By commandeering the legendary phrase "London Calling," previously used as a verbal beacon of hope by the BBC World Service during the dark days of World War II, the song expresses the punks' contempt for the generation who defeated the Nazis, and then spent the rest of their lives reminiscing about it. With its apocalyptic lyrics: "London calling to the faraway towns, now that war is declared - and battle come down," it captures the punks' desperate, somewhat theatrical yearning to fight the kind of pitched battle their parents had fought 30 years earlier. That is, to participate in a battle that might

lead to something more lethal than a head butt.
(Queenan)^{xi}

In wartime also, there are fewer difficulties regarding identity formation, you know clearly which side you are on. For post-war generations, the defining of "us and them" had to be constructed from within. Perhaps also for this reason there was an almost covetous attitude toward the clear identities and militant attitudes of some black communities in Britain.^{xii} Denied a war of their own, punks might still aspire to, in the words of The Clash, "a riot of their own."

Punk also took on a broader significance and purpose through its association (which reached its peak during the Jubilee) with the nation as a whole. As Wright argues:

where so much contemporary experience in this period of economic and imperial 'decline' can only disappoint or frustrate, the symbolism of the nation can still provide meaning. In this respect the nation works to re-enchant a disenchanted everyday life (24).

While the "blank generation" was visibly disenchanted by the model of nationhood offered by the Establishment, punk provided a quasi-nation, a sense of identity and belonging.

Thus, rather than bemoan the apparent facility with which punk was absorbed into the nationalistic hegemony, perhaps we should consider its long-term effects on the English national identity - and particularly for post-war generations. Punk offers reasons to be proud of being English that do not rely on the subjugation of other races or nations, nor of the lower social classes. Punk could be argued to be a reframing of national identity in the image of (certain elements of) the working classes, rather than that of the ruling classes, of the (post) industrial city rather than the pastoral fantasy of the countryside. In this, punk is again perhaps indicative of broader trends within national heritage, which

has been expanded in fairly recent years so that it now includes the local scene alongside the capital city, the old factory alongside the municipal art gallery, the urban tenement or terrace alongside the country house, the vernacular alongside the stately and the academically sanctioned (Wright 25).

The break from, and the interventions in the dominant models of nationhood that punk achieved can be illuminated by the distinction that Wright (drawing on Agnes Heller) makes between history (that which is formally sanctioned) and *historicity*. Alain Touraine's definition of historicity is a society's capacity to act on itself and determine the order of its representations. "Historicity" is thus a "symbolic

capacity" which enables a society to "construct a system of knowledge together with technical tools which it can use to intervene in its own functioning." (Wright 14) In Heller's conception "historicity" also relates to questions such as "where have we come from, what are we, where are we going" These questions are answered by the stories that we tell ourselves and others about our place in society, and may be in contrast to or conflict with both dominant narratives and the "truth." This facilitates then, what Heller calls a sense of "everyday historical consciousness" which includes "a sense of historical development or change as it impinges on everyday life: a '*sense of historical existence*'." (Wright 16) Historicity then, can offer both an individual sense of history and a way of framing that within the broader historical process, and by extension, a way of reframing history to take account of individual, personal history and resist, if necessary, dominant narratives. The Pistols could not have failed, to borrow a phrase, to have felt "the hand of history upon them," but also enjoyed an awareness that they were playing an active role in the formation of history, that their historicity was shaping history. It is an interesting, albeit unanswerable question whether punk would have had quite such a profound effect on the nation as a whole had it not been blessed with the opportunity to hitch its star to the wagon of the Jubilee. But perhaps more importantly, the Sex Pistols allowed their fans to also feel as if they were part

of history; Andy Medhurst recounts that he "drew sustenance and prestige from being in tune with the prevailing cultural aesthetic" (228) and there was no doubt a thrill in being part of a movement which was front-page news, however geographically or socially remote individuals may have been from the events making the headlines.

Wright argues that this everyday sense of historical existence not only testifies to radical needs which can be met neither in present everyday life nor "in the complacent grandeur of official symbolism" but also holds out a utopian hope "that everyday historical consciousness might be *detached* from its present articulating in the dominant symbolism of the nation and drawn into different expressions of cultural and historical identity." (26) Given the Pistols' reliance on such symbolism, it is perhaps questionable to what extent they managed to achieve this. As Hebdige observes:

The various stylistic ensembles adopted by the punks were undoubtedly expressive of genuine aggression, frustration and anxiety. But these statements, no matter how strangely constructed, were cast in a language which was generally available - a language which was current (87).

To some extent this was born of necessity, as punks had no other language available to them, but even if they had been able to express themselves with more individual and arcane

symbolism, and not within the common language, their reach and influence would undoubtedly have been much less widespread and significant. To be effective, punk had to demonstrate, whilst maintaining the critical distance of the outsider, that it was *part of the society it attacked*. Hebdige again:

the punks were not only directly *responding* to increasing joblessness, changing moral standards, the rediscovery of poverty, the Depression, etc., they were *dramatizing* what had come to be called 'Britain's decline' by constructing a language which was, in contrast to the prevailing rhetoric of the Rock Establishment, unmistakably relevant and down to earth (hence the swearing, the references to 'fat hippies', the rags, the lumpen poses). The punks appropriated the rhetoric of crisis which had filled the airwaves and the editorials throughout the period and translated it into tangible (and visible) terms (87).

Despite punk's modernist certainties, the new England which it (at least in its early years) imagined into being was arguably a *post-modernist* utopia, in which difference is celebrated (often for its own sake.) Punk very often ignored and transgressed the gender, sexual, class, racial and aesthetic norms of mainstream society; it created a safe space in which individual expression and diversity could be given free reign.

Notwithstanding the mistaken accusations of fascism that arose from the intemperate use of the swastika, punk's relationship with reggae music and West Indian culture more generally was arguably an early exercise in multiculturalism. The appeal of reggae for punks was largely, if paradoxically, as Hebdige suggests, "in the exclusiveness of Black West Indian style, in the virtual impossibility of authentic white identification" (64). Reggae and Rastas proffered less an aspirational identity than a parallel, analogous identity. "It was an alien essence, a foreign body which implicitly threatened mainstream British culture from within and as such it resonated with punk's adopted values - 'anarchy', 'surrender' and 'decline'." (Hebdige 64) And, as detailed above, the themes of a state of "emergency" and "war."

Punk's advocacy of reggae and Rastafarianism represented a further rejection of Establishment notions of Englishness:

This response embodies a Refusal: it begins with a movement away from the consensus (and in Western democracies, the consensus is sacred). It is the unwelcome revelation of difference which draws down upon the members of a subculture hostility, derision, 'white and dumb rages' (Hebdige 132).

More positively, punk's acceptance of reggae as a different - but equal - cultural form might be said to represent a shift

from a colonial to a post-colonial orientation. As Hebdige observes:

At one level, the punks openly acknowledged the significance of contact and exchange, and on occasion even elevated the cultural connection into a political commitment. Punk groups for instance, figured prominently in the Rock against Racism campaign set up to combat the growing influence of the National Front in working-class areas. But at another, deeper level, the association seems to have been repressed, displaced on the part of the punks into the construction of a music which was emphatically white and even more emphatically British (68).

There is then, perhaps, something in Roger Sabin's argument that "what punk didn't say about (anti-) racism was often more important than what it did. Specifically, punk's biggest failure in the political sphere was its almost total neglect of the plight of Britain's Asians." (Sabin, *I Won't* 203) In the late 1970s the focus of both far right activity and more casual racism tended to be Asians rather than Afro-Caribbeans, particularly following the arrival in Britain of many Asian refugees expelled from Uganda, Kenya and Malawi; but this fact was largely ignored by punk. Sabin suggests that punk's failure to respond to this situation was perhaps due less to an active hostility to Asian immigrants than to the fact that

the issue wasn't a 'hip' one. Asians simply didn't have the same romance as Afro-Caribbean youth – especially in terms of the latter's reputation for being confrontational with the police^{xiii} – and what was equally problematic, they had no music comparable to reggae with which punks could identify. As fellow 'rebel rockers' they were a dead loss (Sabin, *I Won't* 203-204).^{xiv}

Sabin further contends that the influence of reggae and openness to other cultural forms more generally has been exaggerated for positive effect in histories of punk. This may be, in itself, evidence of the metropolitan London-centric nature of many such histories, given that West Indian culture was more widespread and visible (and thus, perhaps, more accessible and accepted) in the capital. When reggae acts supported punk groups outside of London and other large conurbations they often found themselves playing to indifferent or even hostile audiences.^{xv} Sabin argues that "The publicity given to Rasta DJ, Don Letts, of Roxy club fame, has certainly skewed the picture," (Sabin, *I Won't* 216) that "the fact that punk had a blind spot for anti-Asian prejudice meant that this was an area that was left open for exploitation" (Sabin, *I Won't* 213) and this facilitated "an alternative, right-wing, lineage – one that continues to be menacingly significant, not just in music but in wider political life." (Sabin, *I Won't* 213) Nevertheless, exaggeration notwithstanding, it is certainly true that punk

opened the eyes and sympathies of many young people to musical and ethnic cultures which they may have otherwise remained unaware of, or even hostile towards. The "Two-Tone" movement that emerged in punk's wake in the late '70s and early '80s might be said to represent a more thoroughgoing synthesis of black and white cultures (and personnel.)

Given that the post-war consensus has now been replaced with a different - and arguably equally oppressive - consensus, given that (despite many gains in race relations) the concept of multiculturalism in Britain is now widely regarded as under threat, given the poor state of British Rock music which seems unable to imagine itself other than as endless rehashings of the progressive, punk and New Wave forms, given that punk itself degenerated into little more than a uniform style and stance, how legitimate is it to make radical claims about its effects on the national culture and psyche? Perhaps its significance lies, as Neil Spencer argues, in part, in the fact that many cultural phenomena once regarded as beyond the pale are now commonplace. He writes:

As the most public face of the punk insurrection of 1976, Lydon's place in cultural history remains secure. From today's perspective, the spasms of outrage and delight instigated by the Pistols are hard to understand. Noisy bands, weird clothes and swear words on prime-time TV don't amount to much in the Eminem age, yet the surge of

creative energy punk released, and its defiance of the stifling conformism of the times, changed Britain for good, and for the better. If the 1977 Jubilee means anything now, it's the Pistols' *God Save the Queen*. No knighthoods here, then (27). ^{xvi}

An argument can legitimately be made that the Sex Pistols pushed the pop envelope so far that they effectively denied following generations the opportunity to shock in any really society-rocking fashion. The Pistols killed the pop avant-garde stone dead. Robert Garnett concurs with this view, arguing that

The moment of punk passed not simply because it was recuperated, reified or processed by the culture industry, it passed because the space within which it operated was closed down. If punk was simply recuperated it would not still affect people in the way it does. After the space within which it existed was closed down, things like 'Anarchy' simply couldn't be made anymore, and nothing like it, nothing with the same gravity, nothing so abject has been made since (17-18). ^{xvii}

This "space" was "a zone that was neither high nor low; it was a space between art and pop. It was probably closer to pop than it was to anything else, but it was at the same time something unprecedented." (Garnett 17) Although this lacuna - "the only 'pop detournement' worthy of this epithet" (Garnett

21) was short lived, it has been, as Garnett implies, lasting in its effects. One such effect, he suggests, was the "young British art" scene that reached its peak in the 1990s.

For this generation of artists punk exists as an inescapable cultural fact, part of what defines the parameters of cultural practice; it is as important as any recent movement in art. Again like punk, much of the work is deliberately low-tech, or is as suspicious of the grandiose claims made for the art of the 80s as punk was contemptuous of the 70s' reverential attitude towards music. But, like the best of punk, this aspect of the new British art amounts to a meta-trash aesthetic, one that is self-consciously about the low, the base and the profane. More than anything else, it is in the way in which new British art has opened up a space between academic high art and the realm of popular culture that it can be said to form part of the legacy of punk. And, as is the case with punk, its singularity can only be appreciated if it is discussed alongside the categories of high and low (18-19).

Despite the fact that there have been no moral panics quite comparable with that generated by punk and the Pistols in the late 1970s, punk has, nonetheless, spawned numerous musical offspring. These are generally considered to be the direct offshoots of punk such as Oi!, anarcho-punk, the feminist Riot

Grrrl and, in America, Hardcore and Grunge. Sabin proffers these as evidence that "there is a part of the tradition that was never fully co-opted, which *did* develop an agenda, and which is still thriving today." (Sabin, Intro 4)

However, it is not difficult to argue that such movements are merely so much old wine in new bottles, and I would suggest that the true legacy of punk is to be found in other, more hybrid, musical and cultural forms, which combine punk's neophilia with an attempt to create a culture and lifestyle outside of and perhaps at odds with the mainstream, and dramatise the experiences of often marginalised and excluded youth.

The ecstasy-fuelled Acid House/Rave culture, which took off in Britain in the late 1980s and 1990s, is one such. As Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton suggest, ecstasy - like subcultures - "has a powerful ability to make an individual feel connected to the wider group. [...] But as well as these powerful communal feelings, there was still room for individual interpretation." (396) Many of the social changes attributed to ecstasy and Acid House culture reflect those of the early days of punk.

It made people more tolerant of others, and as young men dropped their defences and hit the dancefloor, and as girls and boys learned to appreciate each other as

friends and not just alien opposites, it did much to erode the famously repressed British character. [...] Black danced with white danced with gay danced with straight. And because it encouraged self-belief and seemed to unlock possibilities, it launched a great many people into creative careers (Brewster 396).

It also attracted a good deal of fairly hysterical press attention, and when Acid House moved beyond the confines of clubs and into the English countryside, collecting along the way a motley crew of anti-establishment groups such as "new age" travellers, squatters and eco-warriors (many of whom had been or still considered themselves punks,) the negative coverage intensified. Attention from the authorities was likewise stepped up, with the moral panic reaching its peak in 1992 when 25,000 ravers converged on Castlemorton Common in Worcestershire for a four-day party reminiscent of earlier hippie festivals, but with considerably louder music.^{xviii} In response, John Major's Conservative government passed the Criminal Justice Bill, "a wide-sweeping set of laws which, amongst other things, overturned the centuries-old right to free assembly and greatly increased the powers of the police." (Brewster 402) As Brewster and Broughton suggest:

The CJB was unique in that it was the first time the pop music of a youth culture had been specifically prohibited. Its famous legal definition of house and

techno as 'sounds wholly or predominantly characterized by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats' showed just how seriously government saw the threat of dance culture, with its combination of music, drugs and hordes of lusty young people (402).^{xix}

Like punk, the era of "true" rave culture was fairly short-lived, due not just to legislation but to other social and cultural shifts, but its influence and effects - again like punk - have been much longer lasting and widespread. Festivals, dance music and club culture continue to thrive and proliferate.

One notable and more contemporary example of such proliferation is Grime. Grime is a predominantly black musical form and culture, though it is also very explicitly British, as the lyrics "Round here we say birds not bitches" from The Streets makes clear. As the prominence of The Streets' alter ego, Mike Skinner, also suggests it does not preclude an "authentic" white - or other ethnic^{xx} - identification, and draws on a wide range of influences including Hip Hop,^{xxi} Dancehall Reggae, Jungle and Drum and Bass (the latter two both products of the 1980s' rave revolution.) It is largely performed and distributed via an underground network of raves, pirate radio stations and homemade "mixtapes." Grime shares with punk a birthplace "on

the estates of London", an emphasis on the "authenticity" of voice and subject matter, few obvious concessions to mainstream pop sensibilities, and a usage of whatever material and media are cheaply available and to hand. As Chantelle Fiddy suggests:

Having adopted a DIY ethos, grime slowly but surely continues to develop its own infrastructure and industry. It's also why grime is often better described as a cultural movement embracing anyone and anything true to the homegrown cause. (Roll Deep)

Grime has also generated a few minor moral panics, mostly relating to the perceived association of gun and gang crime with the culture. This perhaps suggests that it has not escaped from the more negative stereotypes of black, urban culture more generally, but it is nonetheless making its own positive contributions to multicultural, fusion culture. Many grime artists publicly support Rock Against Racism's successor, Love Music, Hate Racism, and it has spawned a sub-genre known as "Grindie", characterised by collaborations between indie rock acts such as Pete Doherty and The Rakes and grime producers and vocalists such as Statik and Lethal Bizzle.

In an article on grime's first superstar, the Mercury Music Prize-winning Dizzee Rascal, Lloyd Bradley makes explicit

comparisons between grime and punk. He suggests that "It's called "grime" for the same reason punk was dubbed "punk": in order to draw attention to its scuzzy street origins." (56) Grime is "punk for a multi-culti Sony Playstation generation, but that would be punk as it started, when it still had a sense of outrage, not punk as it soon became." (54) He describes the music as sounding like

the noise pollution of its inner city environment.

Ringtones, video game bleeps and traffic noise replace conventional musical sources [...] with oral acrobatics that defy the mundanity of the favoured subject matter: life as it is lived on some of London's bleakest council estates (54).

However, Bradley also argues that grime's strong and authentic roots in black culture differentiate it from punk and make it less likely to be recuperated by the mainstream.

But comparisons with punk begin and end with the shared DIY ethic because, whatever the cut of its trousers, punk was white men with guitars, looking to distribute their music widely and make money by touring. It made sense to the mainstream music business and was quickly assimilated. By contrast, grime's new underground remains more self-contained than punk ever allowed itself to be. Pirate radio stations are central to this genuine independence. In essence, the scene is a 21st century

version of the sound system, the music medium that came to Britain on the Empire Windrush (56).

Indeed, for grime artists to maintain credibility with their grass-roots audience, it is crucial that they are not perceived to sell out to the mainstream. Such a perception may, in part, explain the scene's current hostile attitude to Lady Sovereign. She is a white, female rapper from North London, whose underground popularity in the UK has declined sharply since she was signed by Jay-Z to America's pre-eminent hip hop record label, Def Jam. This being as it may, 'the Sov' has done her bit to raise the profile of the young, white, working classes in England. Refusing to regard accusations that she is a "chav" and the living embodiment of the "Vicky Pollard" character from the comedy series *Little Britain* as insults, she instead wears them as badges of honour on her Adidas hoody. She has even made some forays into political life; objecting to the demonisation and criminalisation of her favourite item of clothing, she has even petitioned Downing Street with her "Save the Hoody" campaign. She has also acknowledged the influence of punk on her attitude and output, and makes this very explicit by covering the Pistols' song "Pretty Vacant" on her new album. Likewise, rapper Akala features samples from Siouxsie and the Banshees and The Cure on his recent album, whilst Lethal Bizzle mines those elements of punk most evidently influenced

by black music, performing versions of songs by The Ruts with hardcore band The Gallows and sampling The Clash's cover of Eddy Grant's "Police On My Back".

Punk laid the groundwork for the development of later subcultures in a number of ways. As Andy Medhurst argues, "it was a deliberate slap in the face for established pop aesthetics, declaring generational independence through a carnivalesque inversion of musical value" (225). Whilst punk, dance and urban music have been positively rapacious in their ransacking of the archives, elements of past cultures are not treated with the reverence afforded to

archaeological treasures but "sampled" and put to work in new and surprising contexts. Medhurst further suggests that punk

established that the medium was secondary to the message, that popular culture could and indeed should be a vehicle for social and cultural intervention. Music, in other words, was political - no, more than that, it was a form of politics itself, a politics that concretely engaged with contemporary issues (226).

Dying one's hair pink, dancing all night in a field or wearing a hooded sweatshirt "with attitude" may appear fairly insignificant political gestures, but they have often been symptomatic and symbolic of more deep-rooted and wider social discontent, and the attempts by the authorities to clamp down

on them through moral and legal frameworks suggests that they are regarded as a significant threat by those in power.^{xxii} As societies change, so must their subcultures in order to be vital and relevant, a message that punk made explicit throughout its short life.

Yet (former) members of subcultures are also curiously nostalgic for their "heydays", even if "back in the day" was only five years ago. As Andy Medhurst acknowledges, there is a particular irony in nostalgia for

a discourse as rabidly unsentimental as punk. A central thread in punk's semiotic and ideological repertoires was its scorched-earth, year-zero attitude to tradition and the past [...] whereas nostalgia often springs from an attempt to seek consolation and security in times gone by (224).

Nostalgia is, as many commentators have observed, a consistent presence in British culture, but is perhaps not to be condemned out of hand. As David Lowenthal observes, "The view of nostalgia as a self-serving, chauvinist, right-wing version of the past foisted by the privileged and propertied [...] neglects half the facts;" (27) and not simply the fact that the Left is equally prone to promoting romantic versions of the past. Nostalgia can be a critical and positive engagement with the past and does not necessarily imply a "despairing

rejection of the present." (28) Rather, as Roger Rosenblatt suggests, nostalgists "desire to get out of modernity without leaving it altogether; we want to relive those thrilling days of yesteryear, but only because we are absolutely assured that those days are out of reach." (Lowenthal 28) In this vein, Jon Savage reflected in 1981 that

I still buy records, but it's like it used to be: they fill in various gaps, rather than occupy the centre of my life - these days, I find sex, video and history *much* more interesting. As for punk rock, I don't regret it at all, although I do wonder occasionally.

I wouldn't do it again.

If at all, it's remembered as a blurred, frantic, exciting period, which for all its paraded nihilism, negativity and stupidity actually held out hope as some reaffirmation of the human spirit in this collapsing society (Savage, *Time* 131).

Medhurst recalls his punk days as

a time of strongly drawn boundaries, a time when people took sides [...] Punk happened to me at the same time as a number of major changes in my life [...], indeed it has become intimately bound up with them through the processes of memory, to the extent where the opening bars of a record can plunge me back directly into those feelings of thrilling transition. (228)

As Lowenthal suggests, nostalgia

mainly envisage[s] a time when folk did not feel fragmented, when doubt was either absent or patent, when thought fused with action, when aspiration achieved consummation, when life was wholehearted; in short, a past that was unified and comprehensible, unlike the incoherent, divided present. Significantly, one thing absent from this imagined past is nostalgia - no one *then* looked back in yearning or for succour (29).

Nostalgia for subcultural activity, then, might be interpreted as nostalgia for a lack of nostalgia; a nostalgia for youthfulness.

Thus, even attempts to recapture and recreate the glories of subcultures past (such as performances by reformed punk bands and "Old Skool" raves) may be considered as not entirely conservative and reactionary cultural events, but attempts to recapture a little "magic" in otherwise mundane (adult) lives. As Patrick Wright suggests:

At the vernacular level, the 'unique' gains in importance and meaning with the rationalisation and disenchantment of everyday life; and despite the many problems implicit in the institutional restaging of history there is at least the possibility that real

cultural creation - albeit of a kind connected to mourning - can occur in the public appropriation of historical remains (80).

Although opportunities for genuinely radical activity are perhaps precluded in such circumstances, punk (and past subcultures more generally) can remain an active, inspirational part of England's cultural heritage, and not merely a folly in the garden of a stately pile.

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ⁱ Nevertheless, these alternative national/ethnic identities were clearly of considerable personal importance to Lydon and

McLaren, and may have both aggravated a sense of the oppressiveness of the English Establishment and facilitated the critical perspective of the 'outsider'. McLaren recalled that:

My grandmother had impressed on me at an early age that the English were a nation of liars and the royal family its symbol. England was a country whose survival, she thought, depended on how well they practised the culture of deception. [...] I opened my first store, Let It Rock, with the sole purpose of smashing the English culture of deception. [...] I gathered my art school friends to help me plot the downfall of this tired and fake culture. All I needed now was a record company. EMI became my label of choice. It was English through and through. (McLaren 13-14)

ⁱⁱ That England is taken to be a synecdoche for Britain as a whole, and indeed London for England is, perhaps ironically, a familiar criticism of Establishment portrayals of the nation. Indeed, this essay could, arguably, be titled the 'London-ness of English Punk'. While I accept that this might reflect also my own regionalist prejudices, and in no way seek to deny the significance of the contributions of the Buzzcocks *et al*, it is also true that punk and London have become closely associated in the public imagination. The myths of the King's Road and the 100 Club are testament to this, as is the

souvenir industry that, for a couple of decades at least, produced London postcards adorned with photographs of colorful punks, and punk dollies which were "part of a series that also included Tower of London Beefeaters and 'British Bobbies'."

(Medhurst 229)

ⁱⁱⁱ Lydon writes:

I loved history [at school] because I don't believe any of it. I have a good memory for it, but since I've seen my own musical history buggered up so professionally, I really can't believe anything about anyone else. In twelve years the media changed me into God knows what for their own benefit. So what on earth have they done with Napoleon and the rest? Any kind of history you read is basically the winning side telling you the others were bad. (Lydon 16)

^{iv} It was for this reason, among others, that many British punks deemed it "significant that Presley *died* in their year, 1977." (McKay 57)

It might be reasonably objected at this point that the Pistols, much as they might wish to deny it, clearly were influenced by the antecedent American punk scene. McLaren and the band admitted the influence of the New York Dolls and Iggy and the Stooges particularly, but this influence was translated into something else altogether that was appropriate

to, and shaped by the English context. This adaptation of their musical subculture was greeted by American punks with, by turns, resentment, horror, delight and resignation. Legs McNeil grumbled, apropos of the Pistols' US tour and the accompanying media hysteria:

"So it was like, "Hey, if you want to start your own youth movement, fine, but this one's already taken."

But the answer that came back was, "Oh, you wouldn't understand. Punk started in England. You know, everyone is on the dole there, they really have something to complain about. Punk is really about class warfare and economic blah, blah, blah." (McNeil 407)

A variety of accounts, from both sides of the Atlantic, stress that what distinguished English from US punk was the 'sociological' emphasis of the former. Whilst the latter was largely content to remain an underground artistic movement, in the UK punk was regarded as an opportunity to express political, and not merely aesthetic dissent. Mary Harron recalled that:

You could really feel the world moving and shaking that autumn of 1976 in London. I felt that what we had done as a joke in New York had been taken for real in England by a younger and more violent audience. And that somehow, in the translation, it had changed, it had sparked something different. (McNeil 303)

^v See Peter Mandler, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home* 1997 for a full account and critical analysis of this history

^{vi} If we consider the two films about punk discussed here within this schemata, it could be argued that Jarman offers a Utopian vision of punk whilst Temple's is Edenic. This might at first appear to be a counterintuitive classification as *Jubilee* presents the Tudor past as tranquil and idyllic, and "the present" as violent and chaotic. However, Jarman was filming at a time when punk could still be conceived of as an active movement alive with possibilities, whereas Temple presents it rather as an historical "golden age"; the "fall from grace" emphasised by the film's concentration on the various tragedies that ultimately beset the band.

^{vii} In early 2004 Lydon was a contestant on the ITV "reality" television show, *I'm A Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here*, in which personalities face a number of (usually unpleasant) challenges whilst "living rough" in the Australian rain forest for a number of weeks.

^{viii} As Hebdige observes:

Official reactions to the punk subculture betrayed all the classic symptoms of a moral panic. Concerts were cancelled; clergymen, politicians and pundits unanimously denounced the degeneracy of youth. Among the choicer reactions, Marcus Lipton, the late M.P. for Lambeth North, declared: 'If pop music is going to be used to

destroy our established institutions, then it ought to be destroyed first.' Bernard Brook-Partridge, M.P. for Havering-Romford, stormed, 'I think the Sex Pistols are absolutely bloody revolting. I think their whole attitude is calculated to incite people to misbehaviour.... It is a deliberate incitement to anti-social behaviour and conduct' (quoted in *New Musical Express*, 15 July 1977). (158)

^{ix} As with punk, much of protagonist Jimmy Porter's fury in John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* is directed not just at his "elders and betters" but also "at his own disillusionment and that of his generation: 'Nobody thinks, nobody cares. No beliefs, no convictions and no enthusiasm.'" (Carpenter 10) John Lydon's nihilistic persona finds echoes also in Arthur Seaton, the hero of Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958). Seaton "declares himself beyond morality: 'That's what all those looney laws are for, yer know: to be broken by blokes like me.'" (Carpenter 11)

^x Likewise, one element of *Beyond the Fringe*, that appeared to genuinely outrage audiences was a sketch titled "The Aftermyth of War." "This mocked such 1950s Second World War films such as *The Dambusters* and *Reach for the Sky* (the film biography of Douglas Bader) and, in doing so, laughed at all the clichés about the war itself." (Carpenter 113) As with punk, the targets of such attacks were not war veterans themselves, but

the myths spun around them and deployed to ultimately reactionary and repressive (if comforting) ends. As with punk also, those who were offended by or criticised these attempts to puncture complacent fantasies seemed unable or unwilling to appreciate this subtle but crucial difference.

^{xi} Despite the fact that the song appears to be a fairly explicit attack on a Britain gripped by an unhealthy nostalgia, given that it was released in 1979 "after Margaret Thatcher had taken office, after Sid and Nancy were dead, after punk was dead" (Queenan) it might also be interpreted as a work of nostalgia for the early, vital years of punk.

^{xii} It is significant that the metaphor of war was also deployed in a number of popular reggae songs of the time; for example, "War Ina Babylon" by Max Romeo, "Two Sevens Clash" by Culture (reputedly the inspiration for The Clash's name,) and "Under Heavy Manners" by Prince Far I, a critique of Jamaican Premier Michael Manley's draconian law enforcement strategies. The Clash stencilled the phrase on to their stage outfits, both to suggest solidarity with the Rastafarians and that they too were the victims of an oppressive state apparatus.

^{xiii} This is made very explicit by the lyrics to The Clash song "White Riot": "Black man gotta lot a problems, But they don't mind throwing a brick. White people go to school, Where they teach you to be thick."

^{xiv} Sabin notes that bhangra, the closest Asian equivalent to reggae, was largely ignored by both punk and Rock Against Racism in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and argues that Asian music did not make an impression on the UK music scene until the appearance of a number of "indie" bands with Asian members - most notably Cornershop and Echobelly in the 1990s. Although Asian music is still poorly represented in the charts and mainstream music broadcasting relative to record sales (due, to some extent, to the majority of Asian music being sold outside of the mainstream "chart return" retail sector) and live audiences, arguably both the dance and UK Underground urban music scenes have embraced Asian music to a much greater extent than rock circles in recent decades. The popularity of DJs such as Bobby Friction and Nihal (who have their own show on BBC Radio 1) and bands and producers such as Asian Dub Foundation and Rishi Rich have facilitated a much wider appreciation of "desi beats" and the production of some genuinely "fusion" musical projects. Such shifts have - significantly - coincided with a radicalisation of identity and politics amongst second and third generation British Asians. Given this, we might accuse Sabin of both expecting too much of punk and a degree of ahistoricism, given that Asian culture was, in the 1970s, both lacking a political dimension and largely hidden from, and thus unavailable to white communities.

^{xv} For example, reggae band Exodus were violently heckled when they played at the Wigan Casino.

^{xvi} Weight concurs, arguing that the Jubilee had little lasting effect on Britishness because "Unlike the coronation of 1953 [or punk], the Jubilee offered no coherent vision of who the British were or what direction they should take." (551)

^{xvii} I would myself go so far as to argue that the Sex Pistols represented the last gasp of the Modernist avant-garde.

^{xviii} Rave culture shares with reggae an emphasis on the "sound system" as a key part of a mobile and D-I-Y approach to staging music events. Such systems - and in particular the enormous "bass bin" speakers - also boast the additional subversive advantage of facilitating the creation of oppositional - aural - places within any given space and consequently attracting the disapproval of "straights" and the authorities.

^{xix} The alarmist reaction to Castlemorton and rave culture more generally resemble the similarly horrified responses to "incursions" of "the mob" (i.e. the urban proletariat - in the guise of ramblers, hikers and day-trippers) into the English countryside earlier in the twentieth century. See both Wright and Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* 1975 for fuller accounts of these phenomena.

^{xx} The English-Chinese artist Wong is symptomatic of such diversity. The lyrics of and video for his song "Who's That

Boy" flag up his ethnicity whilst having fun with stereotypes of Chinese culture (Kung Fu movies) and of first-generation Chinese immigrants (selling counterfeit DVDs on street corners) but is still firmly rooted in the context of London (both its housing estates and its musical cultures.)

^{xxi} In this context, DJ and film-maker Don Letts' claim that "Hip-hop is black punk rock" is not insignificant (Colegrave 364)

^{xxii} The "hoodie" has arguably replaced the safety pin as the definitive symbol of delinquent youth and, as such, has found itself the recipient of negative attention and sometimes attempts at legislation from media, politicians and local authorities. The term "hoodie" has now become a synecdoche for the juvenile delinquent.